

# Penal Heritage

## Approaches to interpretation

Rachel Mulhearn | Maryse Tennant | Charles Forsdick







## Introduction

This paper is a response to the AHRC and LABEX-funded project, “Dark tourism” in comparative perspective: sites of suffering, sites of memory, which explores the public reception of former sites of suffering and detention in an international context.

It considers how aspects of their history and heritage can be presented effectively and ethically to public audiences. Former prisons are now operating or in development as museums, visitor attractions, hotels, university accommodation and residential or commercial use. These include the former Oxford Prison, now a Malmaison hotel, Lancaster Castle Prison, now a visitor attraction, and the former HMP The Dana Shrewsbury, currently being redeveloped for a range of functions including student accommodation.

The focus here is the UK, where recent prison closures have prompted interest in the future of these spaces, and this paper considers the part they play, or may play, in presenting penal heritage. It is aimed at professional stakeholders and practitioners involved in the development and interpretation of these sites.

Front cover: Canterbury Prison entrance  
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## Locating British prison heritage

Heritage sites holding histories of incarceration can be found all over the world. They fit within a broader family of spaces that include sites of conflict, genocide and enslavement, where the built heritage intersects with a spectrum of associated histories. These range from protest against state-controlled abuse of human rights to domestic-level crime, all of which present unique challenges for interpretation.

The Naval School of Mechanics in Buenos Aires is one example of a site of brutal history that has been developed and interpreted to carry a strong human rights message. There are also sites that have shifted into iconic status in supporting dark tourism, such as former federal prison Alcatraz in the US, now a National Historic Landmark and public museum.

The study of dark tourism is active, as demonstrated in recent major publications such as *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* (2017). This discusses the evolution of global sites and approaches to their current use and is helpful when dealing with the many aspects of interpreting penal heritage.

In Britain, the closure of nineteen prisons since 2011 has prompted debate and discussion about their future among stakeholders including local councils, heritage organisations, property developers and local communities whose urban landscapes have long been dominated by these buildings.

## Crime as public history

Prison heritage is already present within the public domain, with museums as the most evident examples. York Castle Museum is located within 18th-century prison buildings, and uses the site's history as part of its interpretation. The National Justice Museum in Nottingham occupies a historic courthouse and jail, and the Prison and Police Museum at Ripon is located at a former house of correction. The boundaries between museums and dark heritage are permeable: narratives of punishment can sit alongside commercial activities like ghost tours that often form part of the prison museum experience.

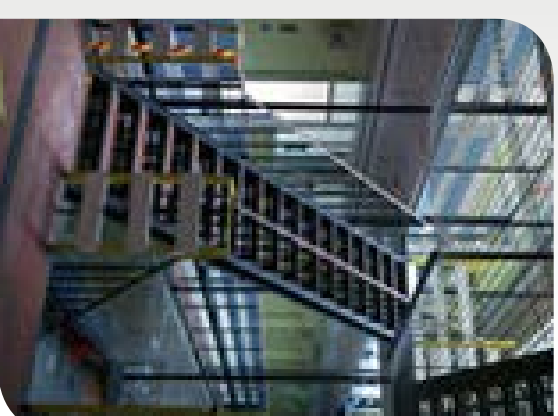
Often, interpretation focuses on criminal offending, but it is important to recognise that many recently closed prisons have been used for multiple functions including immigration removal and military detention.

Prisons such as Shrewsbury, Gloucester and Shepton Mallet (closed 2013) are currently operated as visitor attractions, offering tours and prison-themed experiences. This approach attracts public curiosity yet, while popular, struggles to provide room for more reflective consideration of the site's often tragic events.

Sensationalism can take penal heritage in an unhelpful direction if opportunities for genuine understanding of the subject are denied.

Yet a cause célèbre can also be used to retain and interpret penal history. The future of HMP Reading (closed 2013), formerly Reading Gaol, is uncertain but the legacy of its most famous inmate, Oscar Wilde, has inspired recent public programming. This approach offers an opportunity to build on the interpretation delivered during 2016 by Artangel in association with the National Trust, with the potential to embed this in longer-term development planning.

Canterbury Prison  
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Using artistic intervention to explore penal history is not unprecedented. The Quarters Kids theatre project (2015) explored the memories of prison officers' children at HM Prison Portland, an existing young offenders centre, and academics have identified the importance of creative arts for interpretation that engages with social justice and human rights.



## Preserving and re-using prison heritage

Retaining the authenticity of historic spaces, without intrusive interventions, preoccupies those assuming custodianship of these sites. Many prison heritage sites are legally protected through Historic England's listings. This ensures that the physical intervention at sites under development is appropriate and bounded by expert guidance, and recognises the communal and social significance of the built heritage as well as its architectural and aesthetic value.

The ownership of former prisons in the UK is varied, and dictates the current and prospective re-purposing of sites. Those recently closed represent the diversity of possible uses, and range from hotels to visitor attractions, residential developments and cultural venues. The ways in which the heritage of these sites is preserved and represented is, in turn, varied. For example, the Malmesdon hotel in Oxford, formerly the city's prison, uses its original purpose as a unique selling point with rooms on offer such as "Cell Superior Double" and "House of Correction Double".

Prison heritage clearly sells, and yet is also sensitive and highly valued among the communities for whom these buildings form part of the urban landscape. Public consultation on the plans for former prisons reflects this public concern that the heritage be preserved. Former prisons at Portsmouth, Dorchester, Shepton Mallet and Gloucester, which all closed in 2013, are being re-purposed for residential use. At Shepton Mallet Prison, developer City & Country has responded to local community stakeholders and included a museum and interpretative space in the development plans. Similarly, at Gloucester Prison, indicative proposals include a visitor and heritage centre within the Grade II\* listed chapel.

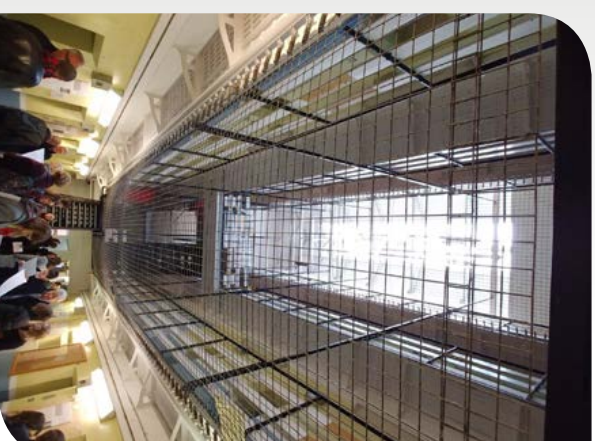
Yet, the naming of these developments, and locating them historically both in terms of date and the use of historic spelling, for example 1792 The Old Gloucester Gaol, distances their future residential use from more recent, raw history. There is also often a desire to restore the built fabric to its Victorian or pre-Victorian origin, which reduces the ability of such sites to engage with more recent history of institutions.

This raises questions about how to retain this history, and where its preservation and interpretation might best be placed. The violent and entangled histories of Alcatraz, for example, have not prevented this site from becoming a hugely successful tourist destination, but the passage of time and the filter of popular culture has created a safe distance between the reality of history and public heritage, enabled by its role as a visitor attraction.

## Audiences, ethics and activism

Museums are well placed to support these histories, whether located at former prison sites, or by capturing the more intangible heritage embedded within communities.

Museums operate in non-neutral spaces and are bound by ethics and professional standards that encourage debate and considered responses to public need. The many painful common factors that characterise penal history do not lead to easy solutions as to whose stories are represented, and how. In recent decades visitor requirements have been placed at the heart of interpretation planning, delivering experiences with which many more diverse audiences can engage. Best practice in approaches to interpretation guides practitioners towards consultation and participatory curatorship with stakeholders and communities of interest.



Canterbury Prison  
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on issues such as vulnerable people, children and women in prison, and prison suicides. Museums and other educational institutions, working in partnership with experts, can foster greater understanding of these difficult histories through carefully designed interpretation and public programming. On a global level, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site Inc. is a charitable organisation in Philadelphia that uses the prison's history to debate the nature of criminal justice in the US. In this way the multiple perspectives present are acknowledged while the built heritage is also maintained.

There are significant sensitivities embedded within these challenging histories, which, when played out on a practical level, need consideration if robust approaches are to be introduced. It is also important to recognise that not all stakeholder audiences bring the same levels of influence to discussions, and some groups may be difficult to engage with. Current practice needs to meet these demands, with ongoing reflection and reassessment on the part of museum professionals and academics.

Penal reform activism is also part of prison heritage, including progressive prison architecture, for example William Blackburn's reforming designs at Dorchester. The Howard League for Penal

Reform continues to campaign

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## Interpreting prison heritage

Sites of incarceration represent the most extreme transformation in their transition from being closed spaces, often associated with violence and trauma, to becoming public heritage. Prisons are places where occupants have died, most notably through state executions, but also as a result of natural causes, homicide and self-inflicted deaths.

These are sites of dissonance at which there is potential for multiple and conflicting interpretations and viewpoints, from the victims and the convicted and their respective families and friends, to the many people connected with the functioning of the prison, including staff and legislators.

Attitudes to justice, punishment and human rights change over time, and responses to this shifting heritage, emerging from the fields of criminology, history, museology, popular culture and associated studies, can inform approaches to interpretation. This provides valuable direction and insight for those responsible for presenting the complexities of this tangible and tacit heritage.

Dark tourism is by its nature concerned with extant sites of interest. However, intangible heritage is an important component of penal history too. Where sites unprotected by legislation are being demolished or face uncertain futures, there is a danger that their difficult and sometimes contested histories are lost sight of and left untold.

Given the closed nature of prisons as institutions, it is particularly important to ensure that intangible prison heritage is effectively retained and presented to the public. Projects doing this include the Prisons Memory Archive at the now largely demolished Maze and Long Kesh Prison and Armagh Gaol in Northern Ireland, and Echoes of Holloway Prison in London, designed in response to the prison's closure in 2016.

These projects demonstrate approaches to public participation, stakeholder groups and audience engagement and potentially provide exemplars to inform future activity at other sites. For example, Echoes of Holloway Prison is mediated by Islington Museum and Middlesex University and seeks to create a legacy for those connected with the prison, including the local communities physically, culturally and socially dominated by the site. It has a gendered and politicised approach that focuses on the Suffragette movement and the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

## Selected references

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## Case study: Canterbury Prison

The former HMP Canterbury site was bought by Canterbury Christ Church University in April 2014. Following community consultation, plans were developed to adapt the built heritage to an engineering and science building, a student hub and a heritage centre. Consultation reflected the need to include the two UNESCO world heritage sites adjacent to the prison and the opening up of the view from St Martin's Church to Canterbury Cathedral. Permission has been granted and work has begun on the first phase of the redevelopment. The physical transformation of the site is being documented through photography and film.

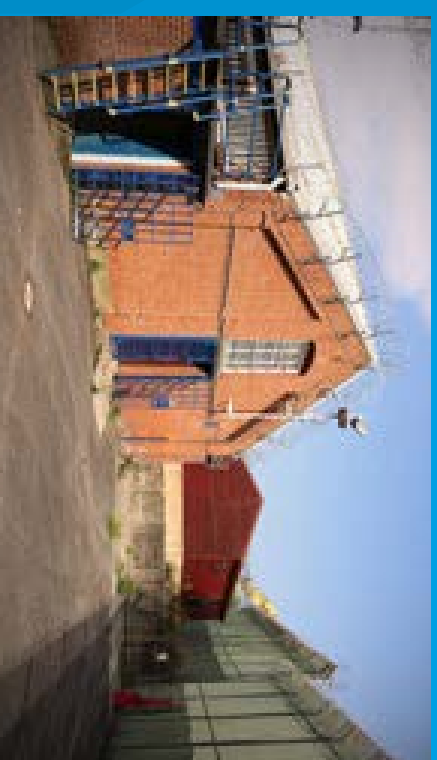
The intangible heritage of the two-hundred-year history of the prison is also being captured through archival research and interviews with people associated with the prison. Here, multiple perspectives in both aspects of the research tackle the problematic nature of penal heritage and will incorporate the impact of the prison, not only on inmates and staff, but also on relatives of offenders, other professionals and the wider community. Life histories of former prisoners avoid the presentation of inmates solely as offenders. Sensitive aspects, such as deaths in custody, have been incorporated in a way that does not sanitise the prison.

These materials are anticipated to be used in future creative interpretations as well as themed events to engage the public with the prison's diverse history, for example debates about the nature of contemporary punishment. Feedback from an initial exhibition held for staff in January 2018 is informing the development of interpretation.



Caption:

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# Project team

Charles Forsdick, James Barrow Professor of French,  
University of Liverpool, Principal Investigator.

Barry Godfrey, Professor of Social Justice,  
University of Liverpool, Co-Investigator.

Dr Wendy Asquith, Leverhulme Early Career  
Research Fellow, University of Nottingham,  
Postdoctoral Research Assistant.

Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, Professor of History,  
University of Tasmania, International Partner.

Hannah Payne, University of Liverpool,  
AHRC Theme Leadership Administrator  
'Translating Cultures'.

Dr Maryse Tennant, Lecturer, School of Law,  
Criminal Justice and Computing, Canterbury Christ  
Church University, Project Consultant.

Rachel Mulhearn, Rachel Mulhearn Associates Ltd  
Museums and Heritage Consultancy,  
Project Consultant.